

The background is a dark, mottled brown with a grainy, almost leather-like texture. In the center is a human skull, rendered in a realistic but slightly desaturated style. The skull's eyes are dark and hollow, and its teeth are visible. Two scythes are crossed behind the skull, their blades forming an 'X' shape. The scythes have a metallic, weathered appearance.

A BOOK OF HORRORS

Edited by

STEPHEN JONES

-JOHN AJVIDE LINDQVIST-

Translated by Marlaine Delargy

I

'M ASHAMED to admit it, but I bribed my son to get him to start learning to play the piano.

The idea came to me one night when I heard him sitting plinking and plonking away on the toy synthesiser he'd been given for his birthday two years earlier. He'd actually taken a break from playing computer games - imagine that. So I went into his room and asked if he'd like piano lessons.

No, he would not. No way. I hinted that an increase in his pocket money might well be on the cards if he agreed. Eighty kronor a week instead of fifty. Robin must have realised how desperate I was, because he refused even to come and look at the community music school unless we were talking about doubling the amount. A hundred kronor a week.

I gave in. What else could I do? Something had to change. My son was sliding towards unreality, and if a piano lesson now and again could bring him back to the IRL-world to some extent, then one hundred kronor a week was a cheap price to pay.

IRL. In real life. I don't know what the other world is called, but that was where Robin spent almost all of his waking hours when he wasn't in school. Online. Wearing a headset and with a control in his hands, he had surfed away to a coastline where I could no longer reach him.

Not too much of a problem, you might think. Completely normal, the youth of today *etc.* Well yes. But he was only eleven years old. It just can't be healthy to sit there locked inside an electronic fantasy world for five, six, seven hours a day at that age. So I bribed him.

And what would an eleven-year-old do with the hundred kronor a week he had managed to extort from a father who was completely at a loss? What do you think? *Buy new games*, of course. But I couldn't work out what else to do. Anything that could divert him from slaying monsters and conversing with invisible friends felt like progress.

Now I know better. Now I wish I'd spent the money on a faster Internet connection, a cordless headset, a new computer, anything at all. Perhaps then the darkness wouldn't have got hold of me. I'll never know.

~ * ~

It started well. Robin turned out to have a natural inclination for playing the piano, and after spending a few weeks playing 'Frere Jacques' and 'Mary Had a Little Lamb' with one finger, he had grasped the basic principles of the notes and was able to play his first chord. His achievement was all the more praiseworthy because there was no help to be had from his father.

I am completely useless when it comes to music. I've never sung, nor played any instrument. Robin must have inherited that gene from his mother, and she should have been the one sitting beside him on the piano stool. But one of the few things we have left of her is her piano. Perhaps that was why I insisted on Robin playing that particular instrument. To maintain some form of... contact.

When Robin started piano lessons it was almost two years to the day since Annelie got in the car and never came back. An icy road, a bus coming from the opposite direction...only a month later they erected a central barrier separating the two carriageways. About bloody time. I came to hate that barrier, its wire structure like a wound across my field of vision every time I drove past the spot. Because it hadn't been there *then*.

Six months after Annelie's death, we moved. There were too many rooms in the old house, rooms meant for more children, for Annelie's loom. Rooms just standing there like empty memorials to a life that might have been. Rooms where I could get trapped, sitting there hour after hour. And on top of all that: rooms which together made up a house that was far too big and far too expensive to run on one income.

I decided to try to come to terms with all the dreams that had died, and got a job 300 kilometres away in Norrtälje. We moved from the house in Linköping to an eighty-square-metre windblown shack in the forest. The house was five kilometres from the town, where I didn't know a soul. The property was surrounded by coniferous forest on three sides, and in the winter you hardly ever caught a glimpse of the sun.

But it was cheap. Extremely cheap.

I carried out the move in a state of agitation. After six months, during

which my grief had taken on a physical form and squeezed my throat at night, tangled me up in the sheets and thrown me out of bed, I saw the chance to breathe in at least a little light. I would start afresh in a new place - for Robin's sake, if nothing else. It wasn't good for him, living with a father whose only companion in bed was death, and who never slept for longer than an hour at a time.

So I cleared the place out. Anything we didn't need for our new life on the edge of the forest went into a skip: Annelie's clothes, her hand-woven rugs, piece after piece of furniture that belonged to a life for two, and carried its own memories. Out. I smashed up the loom with an axe and took it out in bits.

The night after the skip had been taken away, I slept well for the first time in six months, only to wake up in absolute terror.

What had I done?

In my feverish enthusiasm I had thrown away not only things that Robin and I could have made use of (but I just couldn't keep the kitchen table where she still sat with her cup of coffee, or the lamp that still illuminated her face, casting dead shadows), but also things that I would have liked to keep. The cushion she used to hug to her stomach. Her hair slides, with a few strands of hair still attached. The odd talisman. But everything had been crushed to bits at some rubbish dump.

The only thing that remained was the piano. The lads who came to pick up the skip had refused to touch it, and I couldn't manage to drag it out on my own. So it stayed where it was, with her fingerprints still lingering on the keys.

That morning ... oh, that morning. If it hadn't been for the piano I might have lost my mind completely, and Robin would have ended up calling the emergency services instead of being driven to school to say goodbye to his classmates. It's a paradox, but that's just how it was: that piano kept me from sinking.

And so it came with us to our new home, and the only place we could find enough space was in Robin's bedroom, and that's how it came about that Robin started to play the piano, and after six weeks was able to try out his first hesitant chord.

~ * ~

I can't say he practised much, but enough to get by. He liked his piano

teacher, a guy who was a few years younger than me but had already settled for a cardigan and Birkenstocks. Robin wanted to please his teacher, so he did his exercises, which meant at least an hour or two away from the games.

Since I had nothing to offer in musical terms, Robin didn't want me in the room when he was practising. Instead I would sit at the kitchen table reading the paper, listening as his plinking became more assured each time he went through 'Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star'.

Then the roars and explosions of *Halo* or *Gears of War* took over again, and I would move into the living room and the TV, pleased with how things had turned out in spite of everything.

~ * ~

If I remember rightly, it happened in the eighth week. I had just driven Robin home from his piano lesson and settled down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper, while he started practising in his room.

Since I had got used to the sound, I was able to concentrate on my reading without being distracted. But after a while I began to feel uneasy, for some reason. I looked up from the paper and listened.

Robin was playing the piano. But what was he playing?

I listened more carefully and tried to pick out a melody, something I recognised. From time to time I heard a sequence of notes which at a push could be linked to an existing tune, only to fall apart again. I assumed Robin was just messing around on the keyboard, and I should have been pleased that he'd reached this point. If it hadn't been for that strange sense of unease.

The only way I can explain it is to say that I thought I recognised the notes, in spite of the fact that I had no idea what it was, and in spite of the fact that it didn't sound like a melody. It was like knowing that you know something, but at the same time being incapable of expressing it. That feeling. That sense of unease.

I gritted my teeth, put my hands over my ears and tried to concentrate on the newspaper. I knew I ought to welcome this new development, and it would be completely wrong to go and ask Robin to stop. So I tried to concentrate on an article about the expansion of wind power, but failed to read a single word. The only thing that went into my head was the faint sound of those notes vibrating through the palms of my hands.

I was on the point of getting up and going to knock on Robin's door after all when there was a short pause, followed by a halting version of 'Jingle Bells'. I let out a long breath and returned to my reading.

~ * ~

That night I had a horrible dream. I was in a forest, a dense coniferous forest. Only a glimmer of moonlight penetrated down among the dark tree trunks. I could hear singing coming from somewhere, and I stood there motionless as a weight dragged me towards the ground. When I looked down I could just make out a crowbar. A heavy iron crowbar, which I was holding in my hands. The singing turned into a scream, and I woke up with the taste of rust in my mouth.

~ * ~

Even though it was the end of November, we still hadn't had any snow. Robin was practising for the Christmas concert - songs about happy little snowflakes and sleigh rides - while the temperature refused to drop below zero. Dark mornings with the smell of rotting leaves in the damp air, long evenings with the pine trees around the house swaying and creaking in the strong winds.

One evening I was sitting at the table in the living room with my MacBook, trying to write a job application. I was in charge of the greengrocery department at the ICA hypermarket, but for a long time I had dreamed of being in charge of a smaller shop. Such a position had just come up. The work itself would be more varied, plus my journey would be five kilometres shorter each day.

So I polished up my set phrases and tried to present myself in as responsible and creative a light as possible, while the wind howled in the television aerial and Robin began to play the piano.

My fingers stopped, hovering over the keys. It was those notes again. Despite the wind which was making the windows creak and the wooden joints whimper, I could hear the notes as clearly as if the piano had been in the same room.

Dum, di-dum, dum ...

I couldn't remember whether the notes were exactly the same as the last time, but I always knew exactly which note would come next, even though there was nothing recognisable or logical about the melody. My fingers

extended and moved in time with the music as my thoughts drifted off into space.

~ * ~

I was woken by the sound I made closing the computer. The clock showed that half an hour had passed, half an hour of which I had no memory whatsoever.

Robin had stopped playing the piano, and from his room I could hear the low murmur of conversation as he spoke to some friend on Skype or Live. As usual I wondered what they actually talked about, given that they had no real lives, if you'll pardon the expression.

I sat down at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and stared out at the swaying trees; I could vaguely make out the shapes in the glow of the outside light. No real lives. But then again, what would people say about my own life?

My empire during the day was a space measuring some two hundred square metres, where my role was to satisfy people's need for fruit and vegetables in a way that pleased the eye: no empty shelves, fresh goods on display, arranging the trays in combinations that were dictated by head office, teaching assistants the correct way to handle mushrooms.

On one occasion when we were running a promotion I had improvised slightly and placed a battery-driven monkey among the bananas. Naturally it had frightened a child so much that the kid burst into tears, and I had received a reprimand from up above, instructing me to stick to the manual issued by head office. It's like working in an East European dictatorship, but with brighter colours.

I was sitting at the kitchen table thinking about all this when the fir trees and pine trees suddenly disappeared. All the tiny electronic sounds of equipment on standby were gone, and the house was completely silent.

A power cut. I sat for a while in the darkness, listening to the silence. As I was just about to get up and find some candles and oil lamps, I heard something that made me stop dead.

The electricity was off and nothing was working. So how come Robin was still talking away in his bedroom? I turned my head towards the sound of his voice and tried to listen more closely. What I heard made me shudder. Of course it was only a phenomenon created by the movement of the wind

through and around the house, but I really thought I could hear one or more voices in addition to Robin's.

It's hardly a father's job to come up with imaginary friends for his son, but I still couldn't help sitting with my head tilted to one side, trying to make out what those voices were saying. Faint, almost inaudible utterances, and then Robin's replies, which I couldn't make out either. I chewed my nails. Robin wasn't in the habit of talking to himself, as far as I knew. Perhaps he'd nodded off, and was talking in his sleep?

I groped my way over to the side of the room to get out the torch. Just as I pulled open the drawer the power came back on and I let out a little scream as all the everyday objects jumped out of the darkness. The voices in Robin's room fell silent, and the fridge shuddered as it started up again.

When I knocked on Robin's door it was a couple of seconds before I heard 'Mmm?' from inside. I looked in and saw him sitting on the piano stool, his body turned away from the instrument.

'Hi,' I said.

I was expecting the usual expression of listless amazement at the fact that I was disturbing him yet again, but the look he gave me was that of someone trying to place a face which is vaguely familiar. He said: 'Hi?' as if he were speaking to a stranger.

'There was a power cut,' I said, unable to help myself from glancing around his room to see if I could spot the people who had been talking. The scruffy, peeling wallpaper I hadn't had the time or energy to change, the vinyl flooring with its gloomy '70s pattern.

'Yes,' said Robin. 'I noticed.'

I nodded, my eyes still flicking from the bed to the desk, the wardrobe. The wardrobe.

'Were you talking to somebody just now?'

Robin shrugged his shoulders. 'Yeah, what about it? On Skype.'

'But... when we had the power cut.'

'When we had the power cut?'

I could hear how stupid it sounded. But I had heard *something*. My gaze was drawn to the wardrobe. It was a basic, recently purchased IKEA wardrobe in white laminate, but I thought there were an unusual number of grubby marks around the doorknob.

‘So you weren’t talking to anybody then?’

‘No.’

Before I could stop myself I had taken three strides into the room and pulled open the wardrobe door. Robin’s clothes had been shoved carelessly into the wire baskets, with odd tops and shirts that he never wore arranged on hangers. Apart from that, the wardrobe was empty.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Just checking that ... you’ve got clean T-shirts and stuff.’

I couldn’t come up with anything better, even though I’d folded and put away the clean laundry that very afternoon. As I pretended to check the stock of underwear I felt a cold draught. The window was slightly ajar, with both catches open.

‘Why is the window open?’

Robin rolled his eyes. ‘Because I forgot to close it, maybe?’

‘But why did you open it? It’s really windy out there.’

Robin was now back to himself, and gave me the look that means: *Have you got any more amazingly interesting questions?* Even I didn’t understand what I was getting at, so I closed the window, flicked the catches down and left the room. As I was closing the door I saw Robin start up the computer, and a few minutes later I could hear the one-sided mumbling as he communicated via Skype. I placed a pan on the hob to make our bedtime hot chocolate.

~ * ~

It was a bad habit I couldn’t bring myself to give up, that hot chocolate. Because Robin spent so much time sitting still it had begun to show on his body; he had a little belly protruding above the waistband of his trousers. But I still made hot chocolate every night, and we had three pastries each along with it.

Because that's what we used to do when he was little. Ever since he was four years old it had been a little ritual every night: the three of us would gather around the kitchen table before it was time for Robin to go to bed, and we would drink hot chocolate and chat.

I couldn't bring myself to let go, even though there were only two cups on the table and we frequently ended up sitting in mutual silence. At least we were sitting there. When Annelie was alive we used to have a lit candle in the middle of the table, but I decided to skip that particular detail after trying it once following her death. It had felt like keeping vigil beside a corpse.

~ * ~

When the chocolate was ready I placed six pastries in the microwave and shouted for Robin. We munched our way through the pastries and drank our chocolate without saying anything while the wind continued to squeeze the house and nudge its way in through the cracks. I was picking up bits of sugar by pressing my finger down on them when Robin suddenly said: 'Did you know a murderer used to live here?'

I stopped with my finger halfway to my mouth. 'What are you talking about? A murderer?'

'Yes. His bed used to be where mine is now.'

'Who is this murderer, and who's he supposed to have murdered?'

'Children. He murdered children. And his bed used to be where mine is now.'

'Where did you get this from?'

Robin finished off his chocolate and an impotent wave of tenderness swept through me as I noticed that he had a chocolate moustache. When I pointed to it he rubbed it off and said: 'I heard it.'

'Who from?'

Robin gave his trademark shrug and got up from the table, then went and placed his cup in the sink.

'Hang on,' I said. 'Where are you going with all this?'

‘Nowhere. That’s just the way it is.’

‘I don’t understand ... do you want to move your bed or something?’

Robin considered this for a moment with a frown. Then he said: ‘No, it’s fine. He’s dead,’ at which point he left me alone with my empty cup and the wind. I sat there for a long time staring at the streaks of chocolate in the bottom of the cup, as if there were something to be interpreted from the pattern they formed.

He murdered children. His bed used to be where mine is now.

The television aerial began to sing, as it sometimes does when the wind is coming from a certain direction. It sounded as if the house itself was moaning or crying out for help.

~ * ~

I found it difficult to sleep that night. The aerial’s lament combined with Robin’s strange assertion kept me awake, and I lay tossing and turning in my narrow bed.

The double bed from the years with Annelie had been the first thing I dragged outside for disposal when I was getting ready to move. Night after night I had lain awake in that bed, tormented by the phantom pains of grief just below my collarbone where she used to rest her head when we settled down to go to sleep.

The new single bed went some way towards helping me cope with her searing absence, but I still sometimes reached out to touch her when I was half-asleep, only to find myself fumbling in the empty space beyond the edge of the bed.

‘Annelie,’ I whispered, ‘what shall I do?’

No reply. Outside the bedroom window sleet had begun to fall; the wind was driving it against the pane, and it sounded like little wet feet scrabbling across the glass. I crawled out of bed and pulled on my dressing gown with the idea of sitting down at the computer and idly surfing the net until I felt tired enough to sleep.

When I opened the screen I was confronted by the document I had left half-finished in the afternoon. I read through the account of my responsibilities in the greengrocery department, my experience in negotiating

with suppliers and with quality control, my social skills and—

What the hell?

I had no recollection whatsoever of writing the final section, and it sat badly with the rest of the text, to say the least. I read the whole passage once again.

During my three years in charge of the fruit and vegetable section my areas of responsibility have included among other things the dead speak through the notes, but how can a person bear it?

There was a cold draught blowing through the house and I shivered as I sat there in my thin dressing gown, staring at the words I had written. *The dead speak through the notes*. I understood which notes it was referring to, of course, but where had I got such an idea?

I'm losing the plot. Soon I'll be singing along with the TV aerial.

I felt a strong desire to smash the computer to pieces, but I pulled myself together and deleted the whole passage instead, then settled down to rewrite it.

~ * ~

The next morning, the previous afternoon and evening felt like a bad dream. The wind had abated and the sun was peeping through gaps in the cloud cover. When I drove Robin to school he allowed himself a big hug before he got out of the car. On the way to work I switched the radio on and was rewarded with 'Viva la Vida' by Coldplay.

I drummed along with the beat on the steering wheel and managed to convince myself that it was loneliness, grief and my anxiety about Robin that made it feel as if reality was slipping through my fingers. That I just needed to pull myself together. Life *could* work if I could just manage to slough off the old skin and accept things as they were. From now on I would make it work.

I spent the morning inspecting the fruit counters and making some adjustments to Thursday's order, as well as putting up posters announcing this week's promotion: fifty kronor to fill a plastic bucket with your choice of fruit, and you get to keep the bucket into the bargain.

Kalle Granqvist from the deli counter took his lunch break at the same time as me, and we sat in the staff room talking about this and that. Kalle is a

permanent fixture at the store; he's been there since it opened in '89, and is due to retire next year. Since he's also something of a local historian I took the opportunity to tackle the issue that was nagging away at me.

Over coffee I asked: 'Apropos of nothing, do you have any idea who used to live in our house? Before, I mean.'

Kalle stroked his short grey beard and said: 'Benke Karlsson.'

'Benke Karlsson?'

'Yes.'

He said the name in the way you might say 'Olof Palme' or 'Jussi Björling': a person everybody is expected to know, with no further explanation needed. Kalle assumed that everyone was as well up on the recent history and characters of the area as he was.

'Should I have heard of Benke Karlsson?' I asked, relieved at the everyday sound of the name.

'I don't know,' said Kalle. 'I mean, it's a while since he was up to his tricks.'

'Up to his tricks? What does that mean, *up to his tricks*?'

Kalle grinned. 'Why are you looking so worried? He was a musician. He used to play at parties and such like, until...' Kalle jerked his head a few times, which could have meant just about anything.

'Until what?'

'Oh, you don't want to go poking into all that.'

'What happened?'

'Well, his wife died. And he took it badly. After a few years he killed himself. That's all it was.'

Kalle gathered up his dishes, rinsed them and placed them in the dishwasher. I knew I shouldn't ask, that it was probably better not to know, but I couldn't help myself: 'How did he kill himself? And where?'

Kalle sighed and looked at me with a somewhat sorrowful expression. He

seemed to be searching for a more sympathetic way of putting it, but the only thing he could come up with was: ‘He hanged himself. At home.’

‘In the house where we live now?’

Kalle scratched his beard. ‘Yes. I assume that’s why you got it so cheap. Shall we go?’

~ * ~

I didn’t believe in ghost stories, which was just as well, I thought as I tidied up after lunch. But still I felt a tinge of unease and my hands were shaking slightly as I drank a glass of water. I thought I had an idea where Benke Karlsson had chosen to leave this earthly life.

What I called my bedroom was in fact just a part of the living room. Fixed to the ceiling in the centre of the room was a substantial hook that had probably supported a heavy lamp. I went through the rest of the house in my mind and couldn’t find any other fixture on a ceiling that would bear the weight of a grown man’s body. Benke Karlsson had hanged himself two metres from the spot where I slept.

A suicide, then. That was an unpleasant enough idea. But where had Robin got the idea that Benke Karlsson had also murdered children? And that his bed had stood where Robin’s was now?

Regardless of what you believe or don’t believe, it was an uncomfortable image. I had cleared out my own past and instead moved straight into another man’s dark history. Fortunately there are no direct links between the present and the past, except in our minds.

That’s what I thought at the time. Now I think differently.

~ * ~

I could hear the notes as soon as I got out of the car.

It was half-past five and I was worn out after a day at work, during which I had had to make a real effort to concentrate on the task in hand and to stop my thoughts drifting off to the former owner of our house. The outside light was switched off, and apart from the faint glow from Robin’s room where he sat playing, only the moonlight made it possible to see my way.

I slammed the car door and the tinkling of the piano stopped. I stood there

taking deep breaths as my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Then it occurred to me that I ought to go to the tool shed. There was something in there I needed to look at.

As I groped my way towards the blacker darkness that was the old shed, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. The light from Robin's room had illuminated something moving on the ground outside his window. I would have investigated the matter if it hadn't seemed more important at the time to go and look at what was in the shed.

Dum, di-dum.

The notes Robin had played were still echoing in my head as I lifted the hasp on the door of the shed, which I hadn't cleared out after the previous owner. Benke Karlsson. *He took it badly.*

The darkness inside was dense and I couldn't see a thing. However, some time ago I had left a box of matches just inside the door for situations such as this. I stepped into the shed, found the half-full box and struck a match.

Shelves cluttered with extension leads, folded tarpaulins, screws and nails. A carpenter's bench where my own tools lay in a higgledy-piggledy heap with things that had already been there when we moved in. But I was looking for something else. What I wanted to see was right at the back.

I crouched down, blew out the match which was starting to burn my fingers, and struck another. Leaning against the wall was a spade with a wooden handle and a heavy iron crowbar. I gazed at the two objects. Spade and crowbar. Crowbar and spade.

Dum, di-dum, dum. Di-di-dum.

By the time I had finished looking there was only one match left in the box. I put it back in the right place and stepped out into the pale moonlight. As I lowered the hasp I couldn't understand what I had been doing in the shed. I had a bag full of groceries in the car, I was on my way indoors to cook dinner for Robin and me. What was this detour all about?

Annelie used to say that if there was a complicated way of doing things, I would find it. I smiled to myself, hearing her voice inside me as I walked over to the car. When I had put the key in the lock of the boot, I stopped.

I *had* heard her voice, hadn't I? Just recently, somewhere. I looked around as if I was expecting to see her standing next to the car, her hands pushed

down in the pockets of that duffel coat she'd found at a flea market.

But I had shoved the duffel coat into a rubbish bag myself. It had been incinerated at some dump, and no Annelie would ever put it on again. I was overwhelmed with a sense of loss so strong and physical that I had to lean on the boot for support to stop myself from falling as my knees gave way. Why is the world constructed in such a way that people can be taken away from one another?

Then I picked up the bag of groceries and went inside to make dinner.

As I was boiling the potatoes for mash and frying the sausages, I could hear Robin mumbling into his headset, along with the roar of futuristic weapons and the groans of vanquished enemies. I wondered what Annelie would have said about it all.

She would probably have come up with a way of limiting the amount of time Robin spent gaming, thought of alternatives. I couldn't do that.

Can two people converse or hang out together when they live on different planets? Here was I, frying sausages and adding nutmeg to my mashed potatoes, while Robin battled against mutants with a flame-thrower. If you looked at it like that, could we ever really meet?

I knocked on Robin's door and told him dinner was ready. He asked for five more minutes to finish off the session. I sat down at the kitchen table with my hands resting on my knee, listening to the sounds of the slaughter. I looked at the dish of steaming mashed potato and felt so unbearably lonely.

Robin emerged after five minutes. As we were eating I asked what kind of a day he'd had in school, and he said 'Good' with no further comment. I asked how the gaming was going and that was good too. Everything was good. The mash grew in my mouth and I felt as if my throat was closing up. I had to make a real effort in order to swallow.

When we'd finished I asked Robin if he fancied a game of Monopoly. He looked at me as if I'd made a bad joke, then disappeared into his room. I tackled the washing up.

I had just put the last plate in the drying rack when I heard those notes again. I listened more carefully, and thought they reminded me of voices. Had I been mistaken the previous evening, during the power cut? Was it in fact the piano I had heard? There was something about the rise and fall of the notes that sounded like voices. Terrified voices.

My arms dropped, but before I disappeared into the same state as before, I got a grip, strode over to Robin's door and pushed it open.

Robin was sitting at the piano with tears pouring down his cheeks. On the music stand I saw a piece of paper, stained and yellowed. The last note he had played died away and he looked at me wide-eyed.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked. ‘What’s that you’re playing?’

Robin's eyes were drawn to the piece of paper, which flickered as a gust of wind blew in through the half-open window. When I went over to close it I noticed bits of soil on the windowsill. Behind me Robin played a couple more notes and I yelled: ‘Stop it! Stop playing!’

He lifted his hands from the keyboard and I slammed the lid shut. Robin jumped and the sharp crash as wood met wood vibrated through my breastbone, through the walls. Robin's eyes met mine. They were the eyes of a child, pure and clear. He whispered: ‘I don't want to play, Dad. I don't want to play.’

I sank to my knees and he fell into my arms, still whispering through his tears: ‘I don't want to play, Dad. Fix it so I don't have to play any more, Dad.’

Over his shaking shoulders I could see the piece of paper on the music stand. It was covered in hand-written notes. Here and there things had been crossed out and something new added; dark brown patches caused by damp made some of the notes illegible. It must have been written over a fairly long period, because several different writing implements - a pencil, a ballpoint pen, a fountain pen - had been used.

I stroked Robin's head and sat with him until he had calmed down. Then I took his head between my hands and looked him in the eye. ‘Robin, my darling boy. Where did you get that piece of paper?’

His voice was muffled from all the tears and he glanced over at his bed. ‘I found it. Behind the wallpaper.’

The wallpaper next to his bed was coming away from the wall and was ripped in a couple of places; Robin had made it worse by lying there picking at it. I nodded in the direction of the torn patch and asked: ‘There?’

‘Yes. He wrote the notes.’

‘Who?’

‘The murderer. Can we have some hot chocolate?’

~ * ~

We didn’t bother with the pastries as it wasn’t long since we’d eaten. As we sat at the table with our cups, Robin’s gaze was more open than it had been for months. He looked me in the eye and didn’t waver. This was so unusual that I didn’t know what to say; in the midst of everything I was just so happy to feel that contact between us. I sat and revelled in it for a while, but eventually we had to talk about what had happened.

‘This murderer,’ I said. ‘Do you know his name?’

Robin shook his head.

‘So how do you know he was a murderer, then?’

Robin sat there chewing his lips, as if he were considering whether what he wanted to say was permitted or not. With a glance in the direction of his room he whispered, ‘The children told me.’

‘Children? What children?’

‘The children he murdered.’

This was the point at which I should have said: ‘What on earth are you talking about, that’s nonsense’ or: ‘Now you see what happens if you spend too much time playing computer games’, but that wasn’t what I said because

The dead speak through the notes

because I knew that something was going on in our house that wasn’t covered in the *Good Advice for Parents* handbook. Instead I looked at Robin in a way that I hoped would indicate that I was taking him seriously and asked: ‘Tell me about these children. How many of them are there?’

‘Two. Quite small.’

‘What do they look like?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘But you’ve seen them, haven’t you?’

Robin shook his head again and stared down at the table as he said, ‘You’re not allowed to look at them. If you do, they take your eyes.’ He glanced anxiously at his room. ‘I don’t know if you’re allowed to talk about them either.’

‘But they talk to you?’

‘Mm. Can I sleep in your room tonight?’

‘Of course you can. But there’s something we’re going to do first of all.’

I went into Robin’s room and picked up the hand-written sheet of music from the piano. A horrible feeling had settled in my chest after what Robin had said, and as I stood there with the piece of paper in my hand I had the impression that something was radiating from it. I ran my eyes over the messy notes, the damp patches and the creases and I saw that it was *evil*.

As I said, I can’t read music, so it must have been something in the way the notes were written, the hand that had guided the pen, the pens. Or perhaps there is a language that transcends the barriers of reason and goes straight in without passing through the intellect.

Whatever the case may be, there was only one sensible thing to do. I took the piece of paper into the kitchen, screwed it up and dropped it in the stove. Robin sat watching from his chair as I struck a match and brought it towards the paper.

I have to admit that my hand was shaking slightly. My sense of the inherent evil in the piece of paper had been so strong that I was afraid something terrible would happen when I set fire to it. But it began to burn just like any other piece of paper. A little yellow flame took hold, flared up, and after ten seconds all that remained were black flakes, torn apart by the draught from the chimney.

I gave a snort of relief and shook my head at my own fantasies. What had I expected - blue flashes, or a demon flying out of the fireplace and running amok in the kitchen? I flung my hands wide like a magician demonstrating that an object really has disappeared.

‘There,’ I said. ‘Now you don’t have to play those notes any more.’

I looked at Robin, but the relief I had hoped to see on his face wasn’t

there. Instead his eyes filled with tears and he tapped his temples with his fingertips as he whispered: 'But I can remember them, Dad. I can *remember* them.'

~ * ~

If there's one expression I can't stand, it's *Every cloud has a silver lining*. Take Annelie's death. I can think until my ears bleed without coming up with a single good thing it has brought us. The atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan? They led to Japan's dominance of the electronics market through a complex pattern of cause and effect, but tell that to those who were blown to bits, wave the stock market prices under the noses of the children mutilated as a result of radiation. Good luck with that.

I'm rambling. What I wanted to say was that for once there was a grain of truth in that ugly expression. Later in the evening Robin and I actually played Monopoly. He didn't want to go back to his room; he preferred to sit beneath the safe circle of the kitchen lamp, moving his little car along the unfamiliar streets of Stockholm.

The wind was whistling around the house and I had lit a fire. The roll of the dice across the board, the soft rustle of well-worn bank notes changing hands, our murmured comments or cries of triumph or disappointment. They were good hours, pleasant hours.

It was half-past ten by the time I found myself bankrupt as a result of Robin's ownership of Centrum and Norrmalmstorg, with the requisite hotels. As we gathered up the plastic pieces and various bits of paper, Robin said with amazement in his voice, 'That was quite good fun!'

~ * ~

I made myself a bed on a mattress on the floor so that Robin could have my bed. I set the alarm for seven as usual and turned off all the lights apart from the lava lamp; I lay there for a long time watching the viscous, billowing shapes until my eyelids began to feel heavy. Then I heard Robin's voice from the bed.

'Dad?'

I sat up, leaning on my elbow so that I could see him. His eyes were open and in the soft, red light he looked like a small child.

'Yes?'

‘I don’t want to play the piano any more.’

‘No. I understand.’

‘And I don’t want us to keep the piano.’

‘Okay. We’ll get rid of it then.’

Robin nodded and curled up, closing his eyes. I lay down on my side and looked at my son. For the second time that day the feeling struck me again: things could all work out, in spite of everything. It might all be okay.

The feeling didn’t diminish when Robin half-opened his eyes and mumbled sleepily, ‘We can play Monopoly or something. Or cards. So I don’t spend as much time playing computer games.’

‘We certainly can,’ I said. ‘Now go to sleep.’

Robin muttered something and after a moment his breathing was deeper. I lay there looking at him, listening to the wind and waiting for it to increase in strength and make the aerial sing. It happened just as my consciousness was about to drift away, and a single long note followed me down into sleep.

~ * ~

Annelie came to me that night.

If it had been a dream, the setting should have been one of the many places where we had actually slept and made love. But she came to me there on the mattress next to the bed. She crept naked under the narrow spare duvet and one thigh slid over mine as she burrowed her nose in the hollow at the base of my throat.

I could smell the scent of her hair as she whispered, ‘Sorry I went away,’ and her dry palm caressed my chest. I pulled her close and held her tight. If I had doubted that this was really happening, my doubts dispersed when she said: ‘Hey, steady!’ because I was squeezing her as hard as I could to prevent her from disappearing again.

‘I’ve missed you so much,’ I murmured, moving one arm so that I could stroke her belly, her breasts, her face. It really was Annelie. The particular curve of her hips, the birthmark beneath her left breast, all the tiny details imprinted on my mind. Only now did I understand how intense the actual

physical longing for this woman had been, this woman whose skin I knew better than my own.

She moved her fingers over my lips and said, 'I know. I know. But I'm here now.'

One part of my body had been sure ever since her thigh slid over mine. I was so hard I felt as if I might burst. I pressed her body to mine and as I pushed inside her I couldn't tell whether the throbbing beats pulsating through me were mine or hers. I followed their rhythm, and the rhythm turned into notes which became a melody that I recognised, and I couldn't hold back. My body contracted in a convulsion so powerful that I slipped out of her and my seed shot out all over the sheets in a single spasm.

I opened my eyes wide.

I was alone on the mattress. My penis was stiff and I could feel the warm stickiness of my ejaculation, the faint aroma of sperm beneath the covers. But that wasn't all. Annelie's scent still lingered in the room. The shampoo she always used, the moisturiser from the Body Shop perfumed with oranges and cinnamon, the one she called her 'Christmas moisturiser'. Plus the scent of her own body, but I have no words to describe that. They were there in the room. All of them.

I was so preoccupied with trying to drink in that smell and to remain in the moment that it was a long time before I grasped that the notes were real. That they were being played in the house.

I propped myself up on one elbow and saw that the bed was empty. Robin had got up and gone to the piano.

Something moved in my peripheral vision. A faint, swaying movement. Annelie's scent was superseded by another - sweaty feet. Horrible, stinking, sweaty feet. I turned my head slowly to the side and saw a bare foot swinging to and fro next to me. As my gaze travelled upwards I saw that the foot belonged to an equally naked body. A hairy pot belly and flaccid testicles. A head on a broken neck, eyes staring into mine. The hanged man opened his mouth and said:

'Without her...nothing. That's true, isn't it? You can get her back. I did. I am happy now.'

I squeezed my eyes tight shut and pressed my wrists against my eyelids so hard that my eyeballs were pushed into my skull and I saw a shower of red

stars. I counted to ten, and while I was counting the piano stopped playing. I heard voices coming from Robin's room. And a faint creaking sound.

I opened my eyes. A long, dirty toenail was swaying to and fro centimetres from my face, and from above I heard the gurgling, muffled voice saying, 'The door is open. You just have to—'

A strong impulse made me want to curl up, put my hands over my ears and wait until the madness went away. Perhaps I might even have done it if I hadn't heard Robin. In a tearful voice he suddenly yelled: 'I can't! I can't!'

I rolled off the mattress, away from the visitation above my head. I got to my feet and ran to Robin's room without looking back.

The window was wide-open and the room was freezing cold. Robin was standing by the window dressed only in his underpants, leaning out. When I put my arms around him to pull him inside I saw movement on the lawn outside. Two small, hunched bodies dressed in rags were running erratically towards the forest.

The door is open.

In my despair I pulled too hard and Robin lost his balance. I fell over backwards and he landed on top of me without making a sound.

'Robin? Robin? Are you all right?'

I sat up, holding him in my arms. His expression was distant and he was looking straight through me. I shook him gently.

'Robin? What happened?'

His head moved feebly from side to side, and when I checked him over I saw four long scratches on one forearm, scratches made by fingernails.

I picked him up and carried him into the kitchen. As I approached the door of the living room I let out a sob and held onto him more tightly. I inched forward two steps and peered in through the doorway. Above my mattress and the stained duvet cover there was nothing but an empty hook on the ceiling.

'Robin? It's okay now. They've gone.' It was as if another voice was speaking through my mouth as I added, 'The door is closed.'

Robin didn't respond as I gently laid him down on my bed and tucked him

in. His wide-open eyes were staring at the hook. Could he see something I couldn't? The stale smell of sweaty feet still lingered in the room, and had completely obliterated the scent of Annelie. I looked at the hook with loathing. *Couldn't the bastard have showered before he hanged himself?*

'Dad ...'

I stroked Robin's hair, his cheeks. 'Yes, son?'

'Dad, get rid of it. Get rid of it.'

I nodded and licked my lips. They had a sour taste, like sweaty feet. When I got up from the bed I realised I was still naked. I pulled on my dressing gown, went into the kitchen, rummaged in the drawer where I kept tools for indoor use and dug out a pair of heavy pliers.

The first thing I did was to unscrew the hook from the ceiling. I didn't know if it would help, but I didn't want the accursed thing in the house. When I opened the living room window Robin whispered, 'No, no, don't open it.' I hurled the hook as far as I could, closed the window and said: 'It's fine'.

'Get rid of it, Dad. You have to get rid of it. I can't.'

'What do you mean, son?'

'The piano. Get rid of it. I don't want to.'

I was on the point of saying that it would have to wait until tomorrow because I hadn't the strength to carry or even drag the piano on my own, but then I realised there might be a simpler solution.

~ * ~

When I stood in front of the open lid looking at the keyboard, the notes were playing inside my head. By now I had heard them so many times I knew them by heart. I was able to make out a melody, and what's more, when I looked at the keys it was as if some of them glowed, flashed as the notes passed through my mind. *I can play, if I want to.* My hands were irresistibly drawn towards the piano.

Dum, di-dum, daa.

Just once. Or twice. Or as many times as necessary.

When I placed my right hand on the keyboard to begin playing, there was something in the way. A pair of pliers. I was holding a pair of pliers in my hand. A pair of pliers. I worked the handles and saw the sharp jaws opening and closing. *Bite through it. Snip snip.*

I blinked a couple of times and pushed the notes out of my head, concentrating on the pliers. Then I opened the top of the piano and whispered, 'Sorry, Annelie.'

It took me ten minutes to snip through every single string inside the piano, and when I hit a key to check, the hammer thudded against empty space and the note didn't play. The piano was dead.

Finally I fetched a roll of duct tape and wound it round and round the window catches so that it would be impossible to open them without tools. When I turned away the piano was staring at me; the notes popped into my head and my fingers itched.

I laughed out loud, sat down at the piano and played through the entire melody, but the only sound was the soft, dull thud of the hammers.

'Try that, you bastard,' I said, without any idea of who the bastard in question was.

~ * ~

Robin was still awake when I went back into the living room. When I told him what I'd done he nodded and said, 'But I don't want to sleep in there.'

'You don't have to,' I said, lying down beside him on the narrow bed. 'You can sleep here for as long as you like.'

He reached for my hand and tucked my arm around his chest. I held him and rested my forehead against the back of his head. When five minutes had passed and he still hadn't relaxed, I said: 'Do you want to tell me what happened?'

Robin mumbled something into the pillow, but I couldn't make any sense of it. 'What did you say?'

Robin turned his head a fraction to the side; his voice was so faint that I had to put my ear right next to his mouth in order to pick up the words. 'Those children came. They want me to find them. He killed them.'

I glanced up at the hole in the ceiling and shuddered as I thought about the pale, shapeless face that had been hanging there. Puffy cheeks covered with stubble. I had no doubt whatsoever that it was the murderer I had seen. The murderer who had spoken to me. Bengt Karlsson. *He took it badly.*

‘I don’t want to do it, Dad.’

‘Of course you’re not going to do any such thing. How could you?’

‘Because they told me. Where they are.’

Bearing in mind the insanity in which my son and I found ourselves, perhaps it won’t sound too strange if I say that it was a relief to think that here at least was something to hold onto, something I recognised.

While Annelie was still alive we had watched all the *Emil in Lönneberga* films. Robin had been frightened by Krösa-Maja’s talk of mylings, the ghosts of murdered children who have not been given a proper burial.

Mylings. If someone had told me a week ago...but never mind. I took it seriously. I accepted that this was what we were dealing with, and so I was relieved that it had a name. Something that has a proper designation can probably be dealt with.

I asked: ‘So where are they, then?’

Robin whispered, ‘In the forest.’

‘Did he bury them in the forest?’ Robin shook his head. ‘So what did he do?’

Robin carried on shaking his head as he buried his face in the pillow.

I tugged gently at his shoulder. ‘Robin? You have to tell me. I don’t know what we can do, but... you have to tell me. I believe you.’

Suddenly he curled himself into a ball with his bottom sticking up in the air, just like he used to do when he was asleep when he was very small. Then he yelled into the pillow, ‘It’s so horrible!’

I stroked his back and said: ‘I know. I know it’s horrible.’

Robin shook his head violently and shouted: ‘You haven’t a clue how horrible it is!’ He was breathing hard through the pillow, in and out, in and

out, and his body kept on heaving those deep, convulsive breaths as I helplessly carried on stroking his back.

I was afraid he was actually going over the edge in some way. It would hardly be surprising. I too felt that I was very close to the edge in terms of what my mind could cope with.

Suddenly Robin's body grew still and he rolled over onto his back. In a thin, expressionless but perfectly clear voice he addressed the ceiling: 'The man found a rock. A big rock. He dug a hole next to the rock. Then he tied up the child so that it couldn't move. Then he carried the child to the hole. He had one of those iron bar things. He had it with him so that he could roll the rock down into the hole. On top of the child. But the child's head was sticking out so that the man could listen to the child screaming. And the child screamed because it hurt so much. Lots of bones got broken when the rock rolled on top of the child. The man sat and listened to the child screaming. He sat and listened right up until it died. It might have taken all night. Then he dug a little more and moved the rock so that the child disappeared.'

When Robin had uttered the final words he pulled the covers over his head and rolled himself into a secure cocoon. I lay there beside him with his story crawling around inside my head like a mutilated child.

His bed used to be where mine is now.

The man who had done these things had slept in Robin's room. How had he been able to sleep? He had made his coffee on our stove and drunk it in our kitchen. He had looked out of the same windows as us, walked on the same floors, heard the same creaking floorboard just inside the door. And he had hanged himself next to my bed.

My eyes were drawn to the dark spot on the ceiling where the hook had been.

I am happy now.

~ * ~

I lay there looking at the black hole for so long that it started to take on the qualities of its astronomical namesake. Everything in the room was being drawn towards it, waiting to be sucked in; my thoughts moved around it like defenceless planets, orbiting in ever-decreasing circles on their way to destruction. And all the time I could hear the music. Round and round the music went, twelve notes in an incomplete melody.

Incomplete?

If you hum: ‘Baa baa black sheep, have you any wool, Yes sir, yes sir, three—’ and stop there, then you know some notes are missing, even if you’ve never heard the tune before. It was equally clear to me that notes were missing from the melody which was now so much a part of me that I couldn’t get it out of my head. I lay in bed staring at the hole and trying to catch hold of the missing notes.

The pile of bedding next to me had started to move up and down with deep, regular breaths, and I managed to free Robin’s sweaty head without waking him up before tucking him in properly. Then I got up and put my clothes on, barely aware of what I was doing, because the notes absorbed all of my attention.

Dum, di-dum, daa.

~ * ~

I sat down at the piano and played the entire melody. The notes were so clear to my inner ear that I had played it twice before I realised there was no sound. I banged a couple of the notes really hard as if violence was the way to entice them out. It was only then I remembered. The pliers. The strings.

I looked around the room, unsure what to do, and I caught sight of the box under Robin’s bed. Among cast-off cuddly toys and plastic figures I found the Casio toy synthesiser. It covered only three octaves, but that was enough.

I played the twelve notes, and a dark serenity came over me. Yes, dark serenity. I can’t find a better way to express it. It was like getting stuck in the mud and slowly sinking. The moment when you realise it’s pointless to struggle, that there is no help to be had, and that the mud is going to win. I imagine you reach a point when you give up, and that this brings with it a certain serenity.

Over and over again I played the twelve notes, trying out different instruments in the synthesiser’s repertoire to make them sound good; in the end I settled for ‘harpsichord’. I think it’s called *cembalo* in Swedish, and the imitation of its metallic tone was quite convincing.

Dum, di-dum, daa . . .

I went into the hallway, put on my jacket, found the head-torch, switched

it on and fastened it around my head. The synthesiser had a strap, which meant I could hang it around my neck. Fully equipped, I opened the front door and set out for the forest.

A mist hung in the air, and although the head-torch was powerful, the light reached no further than about ten metres. As I set off among the damp tree trunks it was like walking through an underground vault where the trunks were pillars, carrying their crowns like a single, immense roof. There wasn't a sound apart from the soft rustle as drops of water fell from the branches onto last year's dead grass.

I hadn't played for several minutes, and the blind determination that had driven me on had begun to falter when I reached the place.

This had to be the spot. I had walked in a straight line from the house; I might even have followed an overgrown path, come to think of it. On the way I had passed the odd rock, but none of them would have been suitable for the purpose Robin had described.

In front of me lay a number of large rocks which sprang up out of the darkness when the beam of the head-torch swept over them. When I examined the area more closely I found something in the region of fifty large and small erratic blocks strewn by the inland ice across the ground where pines and fir trees would one day grow. Even without the knowledge I possessed, it didn't take much imagination to compare this place with a graveyard.

With two inhabitants. Two children. Beneath the rocks.

I wandered around aimlessly, directing the beam of the torch at the base of the rocks in the hope of finding some sign that the ground had been disturbed. But everything was overgrown, and every rock looked the same as every other rock. I wrapped my arms around my body and shivered.

What was to say that there weren't dead people, dead children under every single rock? What was to say things would be better if I found the two who had sought out Robin to ask for help, to ask him to find them?

We have to move away from here!

The idea was so obvious I couldn't understand why I hadn't thought of it before. There was nothing to tie me or my son to this haunted place, with its gloomy coniferous forest and its brooding rocks. Nothing. It wasn't my responsibility to drive away the ghosts of evil deeds committed in the past.

I breathed out and switched off the head-torch, closed my eyes and listened to the silence, relaxed. When I had been standing like that for a little while, a faint awareness came over me. It grew into a certainty: diagonally in front of me to the left. Something was drifting towards me from that direction, faint as the draught caused by a fly's wings against the skin, and blacker than the night. When I opened my eyes it was gone.

The darkness felt almost solid, and the only light came from the diode indicating that the toy synthesiser around my neck was on. I switched on the torch and studied the keyboard. Then I played a note. Then another. The twelve notes echoed from the plastic speakers and were swallowed up by the darkness and the mist. I edged forward a few steps and played the melody again.

Something moved in front of me and I glimpsed a figure disappearing behind a rock. I went over and leaned my back against the rough surface, then crouched down and played the melody once more. When I took my fingers off the keys I could hear scrabbling, the sound of small feet flitting across the moss and needles on the other side of the rock.

You're not allowed to look at them. If you do, they take your eyes.

I directed the beam of the head-torch at the trunk of a fir tree five metres in front of me and spoke out into the air: 'I am here now.'

Feet moved across the ground, rustling, squelching as they came closer. Nails scraped down the rock just a metre or so away, and I closed my eyes so that I wouldn't be tempted to look over my shoulder. Then I said it again: 'I am here now. What shall I do?'

At first I thought it was a noise originating from the forest. A broken branch creaking in a gust of wind, or the distant cry of an injured animal. But it was a voice. The faint, mournful voice of an unhappy old man who has lost everything but his memories, who cries at the sight of semolina pudding because it reminds him of his childhood and makes him talk in the voice of a child:

'Find us,' said the voice behind my shoulder.

Without opening my eyes I replied, 'I have found you. What shall I do now?'

'Fetch us.'

I had somehow known that this was my task right from the start, from the moment I stood in front of the spade and crowbar in the tool shed. To find, to fetch, to ... *conclude*.

‘Why?’ I whispered. ‘Why did he do this to you?’

The only response was the slow breathing of the forest. I pressed my back against the stone, suddenly conscious of its terrible weight and solidity. To have that weight on top of you, to be slowly crushed to pieces beneath its impervious hardness. To be a child.

When the voice spoke again the tone had changed; perhaps it wasn’t the same voice. Cutting through the old man’s growl there was something that told me this was a younger child.

‘The old man had a piece of paper,’ said the voice. ‘He was writing.’

‘What do you mean, writing?’ I asked. ‘When?’

‘When I was dying. I screamed. Because it hurt so much. Then he wrote on the piece of paper. He said I would scream a lot. And I screamed. Because it hurt so much.’

The voice was faint as it uttered the final words, and I felt the presence behind me disappear. I bent my head so that the beam of the torch shone on the keyboard. Thirty-six innocent pieces of black and white plastic. Now I understood how I had mistaken the notes for terrified voices.

Bengt Karlsson, the musician who *took it badly*, had made musical notes out of the most horrific sound imaginable, the tortured screams of a dying child. And these notes . . . opened the door.

How can a person bear it?

I struggled to my feet and pressed my knuckles against my temples as I staggered among the rocks. How can a person bear it? The dampness, the mist, the dark tree trunks, the evil contained within the very warp and weft of existence. How? I watched myself strike the rough surface of a rock with the palms of my hands until the blood flowed.

The pain woke me up. I gazed at my bleeding hands. Then I glanced up. All the rocks looked the same, and I no longer knew where the dead children were.

When I played the first note on the synthesiser, my finger left a dark streak on the white plastic. By the time I had played the whole melody, the keys were soiled with blood and a few of them resisted when I pressed them. Soon it would be impossible to play.

I found the button that said REC and pushed it down, then I played the whole melody again and pressed REC STOR Then PLAY. I laughed out loud as the toy synthesiser carried on playing the melody all by itself, over and over again.

Dum, di-dum, daa ...

I slipped the instrument round to the side so that I was comfortable, and it went on playing the melody as I set off for home and the tool shed.

~ * ~

A dirty grey dawn had found its tentative way among the tree trunks by the time my work was finished. The blood from my hands had been absorbed by the spade's wooden handle, spread itself over the dark iron of the crowbar. The synthesiser's batteries were running out, and the sound of the melody was growing ever fainter as I walked back from the forest, opened the front door and went into the hallway.

I picked up the duct tape which was still lying on the piano. The notes from the synthesiser were now so weak that they were drowned out by the creaking of the kitchen floor as I crossed the threshold. But the incomplete melody playing inside my head was all the stronger, and I noticed without surprise that Bengt Karlsson was sitting at the kitchen table with his hands neatly folded on top of one another.

The black line around his neck became visible when he nodded to me, and I nodded back in mutual understanding. We were men who knew what must be done. He had been unable to bear it. Now it was time for me to take over.

~ * ~

Robin didn't wake up until I had secured his hands behind his back with the tape, and I placed a strip over his mouth before he had time to start yelling. I would have to remove it later, of course, but at the moment it would be troublesome to have him screaming. I held his legs firmly so that I could secure his ankles, then slipped my arm beneath the back of his knees and heaved him up over my shoulder.

The melody continued to play as I carried him through the kitchen, softly, softly as a whisper it played, and I hummed along. My body was aching with a feverish longing for the missing notes, desperate to hear the completed melody.

Robin twisted and turned over my shoulder, and his underpants rubbed against my ear as I carried him across the lawn. The skin on his bare legs turned to gooseflesh in the chill of the winter dawn. I could hear him panting and snuffling behind my back as snot spurted out of his nose, and from the muffled sounds he was making I guessed that he was crying. It didn't matter. Soon it would be over. Concluded.

The pale light of dawn made the tree trunks step forward out of the mist like dark silhouettes, a silently observing group of spectators with no knowledge of right or wrong, good or evil. Only the blind laws of nature and the circle of life and death, life and death. And the door between them.

I laid Robin down in the hollow I had dug next to a rock. I no longer knew whether the music I could hear existed only inside my head. Robin twitched and jerked, his fair skin in sharp contrast to the dark earth. His head moved from side to side and his eyes were wide open as he tried to scream through the duct tape.

‘Hush,’ I said. ‘Hush ...’

I ripped off the gag, and without paying attention to his pleading sobs I concentrated on the crowbar which I had driven into the ground on the other side of the rock. I calculated that it would take just one decent push forwards to make the rock tip over into the hollow. I rubbed my hands, which were covered in flakes of coagulated blood, and set to work.

As I grabbed hold of the crowbar I was aware of a movement out of the corner of my eye. Instinctively I looked over and saw a child. Its age was difficult to determine, because the face was so sunken that the cheekbones stood out. It was dressed in the remains of silky red pyjamas patterned with yellow teddy bears, and its chest was visible through the torn material. A number of ribs were crushed, and sharp fragments of bone had pierced the skin in several places.

The child raised its hands to its face. The nails were long and broken from scratching at rocks. And behind the fingers, the eyes. I looked into those eyes and they were not eyes at all, but black wells of hatred and pain.

Only then did I realise what I had done.

Before I had time to close my eyes or grab hold of the crowbar again, another small body hurled itself onto my back. I bent over and the child in pyjamas leapt up and seized me around the neck, burying its fingers just above my shoulder blades.

The body on my back ran its hands over my forehead, and then I felt jagged nails moving over my eyelids. I screamed as the sharp edges penetrated the skin on either side of the top of my nose, and blood ran down into my mouth. The child let out a single sharp hiss, then jerked its hands outwards.

Both my eyeballs were ripped out of my skull, and the last thing I heard before I lost consciousness was the viscous, moist sound of the optical nerves tearing, then a grunting, smacking noise as the children chewed on my eyes.

~ * ~

I don't know how long I was out. When I came round I could no longer see any light, and I had no idea of the sun's progress across the sky. There were empty holes in my head where my eyes had been, and my cheeks were sticky with the remains of my eyelids and optical nerves. The pain was like a series of nails being hammered into my face.

I pulled myself up onto my knees. Total darkness. And silence. The synthesiser's batteries had given up. I fumbled around and found the crowbar, traced the surface of the rock until I reached the edge of the hollow, and was rewarded with the only sound that was of any importance now.

'Dad ... Dad ...'

I crawled down to Robin. I bit through the tape around his wrists and ankles. I tore off my jacket and shirt and wrapped them around him. I wept without being able to shed any tears, and I fumbled in the darkness until he took my hand and led me back to the house.

Then he made a call. I couldn't use the phone, and had forgotten every number. I was frightened when he spoke to someone whose voice I couldn't hear. I groped my way to bed and sought refuge beneath the covers. That's where they found me.

~ * ~

They say I'm on the road to recovery. I will never regain my sight, but my

sanity has begun to return. They say I will be allowed out of here. That I will learn to adapt.

Robin comes to see me less and less often. He says he's happy with his foster family. He says they're nice. He says he doesn't spend so much time playing games these days. He's stopped talking about how things will be when I get out.

And I don't think I will get out, because I don't want to leave.

Food at fixed times and a bed that is made every day. I move blindly through the stations of each day. I have my routines, and the days pass. No, I shouldn't be let out.

Because when I sit in the silence of my room or lie in my bed at night, I can hear the notes. My fingers extend in empty space, moving over an invisible keyboard, and I dream of playing.

Of replaying everything. Getting Annelie to visit me again and embracing her in the darkness, paying no heed to which doors are open or what might emerge through them.

There are no musical instruments in the unit.

[image]

JOHN AJVIDE LINDQVIST was born 1968 and is probably the only Swedish person who makes his living from writing horror. His first novel, *Let the Right One In*, has sold over half a million copies in a country with nine million inhabitants. The book has been published in thirty countries and been made into two movies, one Swedish and one American (under the title *Let Me In*).

His other novels include *Handling the Undead* and *Harbour*, both of which are in the process of being turned into films. His most recent book, *Little Star*, was recently published by Quercus.

The following novella is the author's first story written specifically for an English-language market and, as Lindqvist explains: 'The idea for "The Music of Bengt Karlsson, Murderer" came to me four years ago, when my son was ten years old and started taking piano lessons.

'The disjointed, unharmonic notes coming from his room gave me the thought, *What if he would accidentally hit on a series of notes that... summoned something?* I wrote down the idea and waited for that critical second idea that could turn it into a story. It never came by itself, so the original idea just lay slumbering in that special file on my computer.

'When the editor asked me for a contribution to this anthology, I opened the file, shook life into the notes-that-summon-idea and examined it more closely. Originally I had a vague plan of some Cthulhuesque monster being attracted by

the music, but that didn't work out. Then the idea of a father and son being alone and isolated clicked together with the image of *mylingar*, the ghosts of murdered children ... and the rest was the usual sweat and tears to forge those images into a story.

'It might be the one story I have written that has scared me the most. It plays deeply on my own fears of losing all I love. Especially towards the end, I wrote on in a state of mild but constant horror.

'It was a relief when it was over.'